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Dedication of The Institute of Environmental and Human Health –
Texas Tech University and Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center

"By Working Together
Communities and Scientists Can Make a Difference"

Removing toxicants from the environment is not environmental health in its entirety – health is a state of mental and physical well being. The term environmental health should convey health and also should convey a beautiful, livable environment that promotes well being and improved quality of life.

At the National Institutes of Health, environmental research is mainly the science of prevention – prevention of disease from environmental exposures over a long period of time. In the past 30 years we, as a nation working together, have made remarkable strides in preventing disease caused by environmental exposures. We have lowered lead and DDT levels in humans and have made the environment safer: The air is cleaner; our rivers are no longer on fire; waste is handled more safely.

Yet, environmental diseases remain a big problem. For example, cancer continues to be a tremendous public health burden; metal toxicity from lead or mercury significantly impacts intelligence in exposed children; asthma is on the rise and is a major health concern; and, birth defects continue, occurring in more than 1% of pregnancies in the U.S.; diabetes is on the rise and is linked to dietary factors and to other environmental factors.

Ladies and gentlemen, if we want to protect our future, and to protect future generations, we have a lot of work to do in environmental health; especially, in balancing the essentials of

economic growth with the prevention of disease.

I want to spend a moment now talking about some of the needs in environmental health. Our field of environmental health has become too focused. The local communities and the Nation's scientists fail to take a leadership role; and, because of that failure, communities and scientists are all too often taken out of the picture. This opens the door for the regulatory agencies, and special interest groups to take the lead, and in so doing, to narrow the boundaries of environmental health. Narrow boundaries, around the definition of problems, are dictated by narrow regulatory agendas or legislative mandates or by narrow regulatory agency goals. The narrow debate, focused intensely on risk assessment and regulation of just one chemical, such as mercury, consumes tremendous amounts of energy and builds divisiveness and conflict. Ultimately, these narrow boundaries cause us "to miss the forest for the trees." This marginalizes the field and also leads to the "one size fits all" type of regulation. Examples abound, such as current debates on MTBE fuel additive and the amount of methyl mercury in the diet. Consider the conflict between the World Health Organization's malaria control program in certain parts of the world and interest groups against any use of DDT. Common sense says that it would be in the best interest of both groups to eliminate malaria wherever possible and, therefore, get around the need for future use of DDT altogether.

The local communities and the scientists, not the regulatory agencies, need to assume the lead in finding common sense solutions. For example, what are the problems right here in this community, and what are the trade-offs that work best here?

Now, do not get me wrong. The regulatory agencies, like the EPA, FDA, and OSHA, are doing what they are supposed to be doing. We simply have to find more ways to get communities and scientists to take the lead. The regulatory agencies are simply filling a gap

created by the lack of our involvement. We have to reverse this trend. The gap must be filled by the communities and the scientists. We should take the lead in addressing environmental issues and we should do it now!

Problems in environmental health need to be defined in real world terms – what is happening right here in this community. Problems should be approaches in a balanced way, and by including sound science and the environmental health perspective. Indeed, scientists can often help in finding the interconnections that will prevent narrow boundaries.

Environmental science at the state and local levels must grow and help in defining the problems and in setting policy; scientists must work to create new information, in prevention and for cleaning toxic sites, and finally, scientists must participate in finding ways to have environmentally sound economic growth and prosperity.

The Institute of Environmental and Human Health at Texas Tech will be a leader in research and education, integrating the environmental and human health sciences. Working with the community, the Institute can help change the equation — working to take leadership responsibility for our environmental health future. Working together, we **can** make a difference.

In closing, I congratulate the vision of the Texas Tech University system for establishing The Institute for Environmental and Human Health. We at the National Institutes of Health look forward to working with you in the future, as we give thought to such topics as border environmental health and other regional environmental research needs.

Thank you very much for your attention.